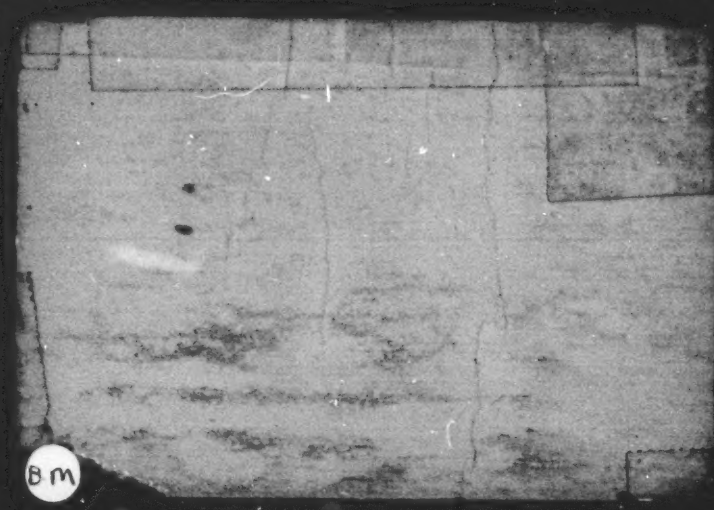
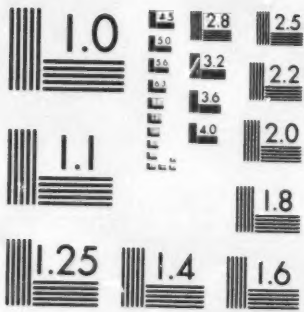




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ABSTRACT

President Jimmy Carter's televised address on energy, July 15, 1979, illustrates the principle that rhetoric serves as a transformer, taking issues involving incompatible and insatiable demands and converting them to forms amenable to solutions. The address depicted three distinct yet related scenes: (1) the immediate scene of the energy crisis; (2) the political scene of Carter's role efficacy, and more generally, the responsibility of government; and (3) a vast scene of national values and identity. Carter attempted to unite each of these units into an explanatory whole that would set the conditions necessary for concrete action to take place. The effect of the address was generally positive, as it was heard by an estimated 100 million people, and poll results indicated a rise in Carter's approval rating. While the address failed to move Congress toward passing an energy program, it succeeded as the first step on Carter's ascent in public opinion. (DF)

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CARTER'S JULY ENERGY SPEECH :

PREPARING THE GROUND FOR ACTION

by

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President Carter's caucus and primary victories in Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, and New Hampshire seem to indicate a willingness among the American people to stand by his leadership through troubled times. Less than a year ago, such outcomes would have been doubtful. The crises in Iran and Afghanistan have caused a "let's pull together" atmosphere which has been of great benefit to the Carter administration. Last July 15, however, the situation was quite different. Beseiged by problems of oil supply, inflation, and public image, the Carter administration could only look gloomily on the upcoming presidential election year. Action was necessary to convert these problems into, at least, some semblance of solution. The energy address of July 15, 1979 was an attempt to perform just such a feat.

W. Lance Bennett has suggested that the very nature of a political issue lends itself to rhetoric because "as stated, it cannot be resolved".¹ Rhetoric serves as a transformer - taking issues involving incompatible and insatiable demands and converting them to forms amenable to solutions having the appearance of satisfactory outcomes. Carter's energy address provided a vivid illustration of this principle. He attempted to construct a description of the energy crisis in a vocabulary designed to provide a favorable ground for political action. It was his portrayal of scene that was the key to this attempt.

In the application of the Burkeian scheme to rhetorical acts, scene may be broadly construed. Hugh D. Duncan's definition of scene seems especially relevant to an analysis of this address:

Scene is the symbolization of time and place, the setting of the act which creates the conditions for social action...Social time is always present time because we select the kinds of pasts and

futures we need to act in a present. Futures and pasts are symbolized in terms of what we want to do now, of solutions to problems which must be solved in order for action to go on. 2

Of interest in this definition is the selection of pasts and futures to serve context for the present. Carter's energy address contained a substantial element of just such a use of "social time". Because of this, scene was a controlling element in the address and will be the focus of this paper. With this concentration on scene, we will be able to lay naked the mechanism by which insatiable demands are recast into forms amenable to solution.

The July 15 address depicted three distinct, yet related scenes; 1) the immediate scene of the energy crisis, 2) the political scene of Carter's role efficacy and, more generally, the responsibility of government, and 3) a vast scene of national values and identity. Carter attempted to unite each of these units into an explanatory whole that would set the conditions necessary for concrete action to take place.

THE PRECIPITATING SCENE - ENERGY

The President had addressed the energy issue on four previous occasions with a steady decline in audience from 80 million in April 1977 to 30 million in April 1979.³ This time, however, the problem was more tangible and immediate than it had been in the past. The early summer headlines were dominated by news of gasoline shortages, long lines at service stations, and fears about the supply of heating oil for the upcoming winter.⁴ Obviously, the first step Carter took in depicting the scene was to reinforce the image of crisis. Using the

words of an anonymous citizen, he graphically illustrated the gravity of the situation; "Our neck is stretched over the fence, and OPEC has the knife".⁵ Despite this deadly image, Carter avoided the easy solution of placing devil's horns on turbans. He clearly portrayed the crisis as one of our own making. OPEC may have raised the prices, but we raised the demand for oil that allowed them to do so. Our previous actions, then, had created the conditions for the dire present. If this was a crisis, it was a crisis long in the coming and intimately connected to our lifestyle.

A great majority of the public felt that the crisis was an illusion or, at least, exaggerated for the benefit of the oil companies.⁶ Carter never mentioned the oil companies in this address while strongly emphasizing that the crisis was real and would not disappear. Despite the barriers of popular belief on this point, the President maintained his stance that there was no easy solution. The energy crisis was to be a test of American mettle:

Energy will be the immediate test of our ability to unite the nation. It can also be the standard around which we rally. On the battlefield of energy, we can win for our nation a new confidence and we can seize control of our common destiny.

As "the standard around which we rally", the crisis was the ground upon action would take place. Carter referred to the energy crisis in the singular, but there was the implicit recognition that it was a manifestation of a variety of problems, both social and technological. Any action taken on the "battlefield of energy" would have its effects upon national unity, confidence, and control. Thus was the scene the soil from which agents, agencies and acts could be directed toward essential goals.

From a rhetorical point of view, the six point energy proposal

was far less interesting than the atmosphere of challenge and response Carter conveyed as the setting for action. What came through more clearly than any concrete proposal was a solution through sacrifice. He put this negative act in positive terms to demonstrate his concern that the efforts of individuals were seen as a crucial element of the scene.

We often think of conservation only in terms of sacrifice. In fact it is the most painless and immediate way of rebuilding our nation's strength. Every gallon of oil each one of us saves is a new form of production - it gives us more freedom, more confidence, that much more control over our own lives.

The situation was a national crisis in the all-inclusive sense of that term - it could only be resolved through the acts of many agents. This strategy, of course, had been a Carter favorite from the time of his emergence as a public figure.⁷ Used here, it emphasized the view that the scene was an opportunity, rather than a disaster. It was implied that only if the scene were viewed in this way could any act result in the "control" of destiny.

To be sure, the acts of individual citizens were to be matched by the President. His six point plan were designed to provide concrete action within this scene. More generally, Carter defined his role as one of "leading the fight", "enforcing fairness", "ensuring honesty", and "above all, I will act". The last was quite important for it was a perceived failure to act decisively that brought the popularity of the Carter administration low. Because of this unfavorable image, a depiction of the political scene was essential.

THE POLITICAL SCENE

With a 25% approval rating nationwide and 29% in his native South, Carter's popularity was the lowest since the Truman administration.⁸ The American public evidently doubted the President's ability to provide leadership. Such a political scene could hardly be considered propitious for the launching of a re-election campaign.

With public opinion polls as they were, Carter must certainly have realized the nature of his political failure. It was at the action level -- a seeming inability to transform his rhetorical visions into concrete policy to maintain public faith in the firmness of his direction. When the energy speech, originally scheduled for July 5, was cancelled, this directionless image was intensified.⁹ It seemed that when something most needed to be done, Carter had failed miserably. The cancellation, however, resulted in a windfall of publicity, increasing public curiosity about what the next move might be.¹⁰ In the interim, Carter retreated from the White House to the scene of his administration's only clear popular success--Camp David, the site of the Arab-Israeli peace summit. There a domestic equivalent to those negotiations was held. Leaders from all walks of life came and brought a great amount of publicity with them. When he did leave the mountain, it was to visit average American homes in Carnegie, PA and Martinsville, West Virginia. Even before the address, then, Carter was actively shaping the scene for his return from the mountain. The situation suggested a symbolic analog the prophet or seeker (Christ in the desert or Buddha under the Bodhi tree) -- a retreat from the world to attain enlightenment through trial and contemplation. Such scene-shaping conveyed the subtle message that all was not to be as it was before. As Carter expressed the sequence of events:

As I was preparing to speak, I began to ask myself the same question that I know has been troubling many of you: Why have we not been able to get together as a nation to resolve our serious energy problem... I realized more than ever that, as President, I need your help. So I decided to reach out and listen to voices of America, I invited to Camp David people from almost every segment of our society - business and labor; teachers and preachers; governors, mayors, and private citizens. Then I left Camp David to listen to other Americans - men and women like you. It has been an extraordinary ten days and I want to share with you what I heard.

The seeker comes through clearly here, as does his emphasis on his inability to act alone. The situation called for measures beyond the scope of "politics as usual".

Before he could do anything else in his speech, Carter had to confront the public image of his performance in office. Indeed, early in the address he acknowledged the adverse public opinion and, in a limited sense, admitted his failures. Realistically, there was little else he could do. Such an apologia could have become an awkward affair. However, rather than directly admit his shortcomings, he criticized himself by reading some of the comments he had gathered during his retreat. Now enlightened, he could admit these failures without the discomfort that might result from a more direct approach. The comments took aim at Carter and the state of the nation in general.

- You're not leading this nation, you're just managing the government.
- If you lead, we will follow.
- I feel so far from government.
- Some of your cabinet members don't seem loyal.
- Some have wasted energy, others have had nothing to waste.
- We are confronted with a moral and spiritual crisis.
- When we enter the moral equivalent of war, don't issue us BB guns.

While purging himself of these criticisms by expressing them, the "enlightened" Carter could also transcend these concerns. He placed the political scene against a larger background when he stated; "All the

legislation in the world can't fix what's wrong with America". The scene - the results of past actions - was the real problem. The crisis was too large to lay at the feet of one man or one administration. Effective acts could take place only within the scope of the grand scene.

Involved here were the President's comments on "island" Washington. Though the people turned to the capitol for answers, Carter asserted that the answers could not be found there. Responsibility had to return to the people. He attempted to divorce himself from island Washington and portray himself as the "outsider" he had been in 1976, a representation for which he was taken to task.¹¹ There was, however, a basis in public opinion for this self-portrait. Carter's low approval ratings applied to his effectiveness in office, not to his personal image. He was viewed as a good and moral man who did not have a well-defined political program. Many viewed him, not as an ordinary politician, but as a "well intentioned amateur".¹² This personal image allowed him to remove himself symbolically from the federal political morass. Like Woodrow Wilson with his League of Nations, Carter was viewed as a non-politician who could appeal to the average citizen.

Carter, then, shaped the political scene before the speech to point to the extraordinary nature of the situation. This he used in the speech to be able to admit failure; yet, point to a scene so vast in scope that blame could not be placed on his head. The larger scene was the panorama of American values. As he moved into the section of his address dealing with this, Carter may have hoped that the failures of his leadership would be dwarfed by the magnitude of this scene.

THE CULTURAL SCENE - POPULIST VALUES

The real problem in Carter's vocabulary - the one that was labeled a "fundamental threat to American democracy", portrayed as "striking at the very heart, soul, and spirit of the national will", the problem that could not be effected by legislation, yet, lay at the root of all problems - was a "crisis of confidence" in the country caused by a moral and spiritual vacuum. Carter attempted to put the national psyche in perspective with a scenic portrayal of metaphysical America that would serve to set the necessary conditions for the solution of material problems.

Pat Caddell, the President's personal pollster, had advised him that the climate of pessimism and cynicism in America had been rising at an alarming rate over the first six months of 1979, even among the moneyed and educated "elite".¹³ In response to this, the energy address pointed to the past to remind listeners of the purpose and values that had formed the strength of the nation. Carter spoke of confidence of progress toward a better future as the overarching purpose that had guided the nation. (Note that the selection of such an overarching purpose fit the pessimistic climate reported by Cadell) The values of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and faith in God had been instrumental in binding America to that purpose and formed a spiritual ground for action. In the present, however, those values were being usurped by a materialistic philosophy stressing the consumption of goods that "do not satisfy our longing for meaning". The results of this were - productivity down, pessimism about the future, low voter turnout, and lack of respect for institutions. (Note again how these ills paralleled Caddell's findings) Becoming more specific, Carter pointed to the turbulent events of the sixties and seventies as a manifestation of this spiritual decline. By naming these social demons, he attempted to exorcise them - the assassination of the

Kennedys and King, Vietnam, Watergate, inflation, and dependence on foreign oil.. All these events were related in Carter's rhetoric. They were wounds, caused by a loss of purpose and a degeneration of values, that had left scars on the nation's psyche. He placed all these events in the foreground to symbolize the frustrating complexity and confusion of modern civilization. The vision of the past - its purpose and values - was selected to demonstrate in "social time" what we had become in the present. The false values of materialism constituted the scene on which all the horrors of modern life had been enacted. The purpose and values of the past would have to be restored as the scene for any truly effective action. Again, he transferred the burden of blame to causes other than his administration. The same was true of solutions. As Carter stated: The strength we need will come, not from the White House, but from every house in America". By emphasizing the wider scene of values, he suggested that only such a restoration of values could solve our problems - including the energy problem. This populist theme, which had been present in Carter's style throughout his public life, found its most fertile expression in this address.

THE TIE THAT BINDS

The effect of Carter's address was generally positive. The CBS-N.Y. Times poll taken after the speech showed that it succeeded in capturing an audience of 60 million on television and an estimated 100 million on both radio and television. His approval rating rose from 25% - 37%. 40% said they had greater faith in the President after the speech. A huge 77% agreed with him that the country was faced with a spiritual and moral crisis.

On the other hand, still only 36% were convinced that the energy crisis was real.¹⁴ Since that time, Carter's approval rating has not dipped back to the pre-speech level, but there have been other factors at play.

One factor was the shakeup of the administration less than a week after the speech which muddled the waters of political opinion. If anything, this may well have served to demonstrate how serious the President was about "providing leadership" in the scene of crisis. It also demonstrated that things, indeed, were not going to be the same under the new "enlightened" Carter. After initial shock, new cabinet members were filled and approved rather painlessly. A second factor was the easing of the energy crisis - gasoline became available and no heating fuel shortage developed over the winter. This was due to the price increases of these commodities and a voluntary increase in Saudi Arabia's production limits - not to any of Carter's six proposals. These proposals presently languish in Congressional committee with one part, authorization for emergency rationing, already defeated. The third factor, of course, were the events in Iran and Afghanistan which provided the administration with foreign threats to ease the pressure of domestic problems.

As a piece of deliberative oratory, the July address failed to move Congress toward passing an energy program. The address, however, was also part apologia and part exhortation. The real importance was in its shaping of scene, the preparation of a ground for action. Though he employed the "battlefield of energy" metaphor, that battlefield was only a small part of a grander scene in which we were our own worst enemy. Energy was more than the topic of the address, it also was an extended metaphor. Carter spoke of the energy of his efforts to bring the situation under control while

admitting his failures. He spoke of our psychological and social energy, our willingness and ability to guide our own destiny. He promised to act, but not alone. If America had lost its driving energy of purpose, it could only be revitalized through a resurrection of past values serving as a context for action.

All three scenes painted by the President were related. Energy was simply a tangible manifestation of the greater cultural problems which conventional (non-Carterian) politics would be unable to solve. We can see, then, that this was an attempt to recast insatiable political demands into a form amenable to solution through the President's vision of political action. The triptych scene was instrumental toward this goal. Through it, he was able to transcend the immediate issues without losing sight of them - an extraordinary rhetorical feat. Though the energy program bogged down in Congress, the July address was the first step on Carter's road back from the depths of public opinion to establish an image of leadership.

FOOTNOTES

1. W. Lance Bennett, "Political Scenarios and the Nature of Politics", Philosophy and Rhetoric, 8(Winter, 1975) p.27.
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3. Hedrick Smith, "Carter, Conscious of Risk, Seeks Wider Audience", New York Times, July 14, 1979, p.1.
4. "Fuel Crisis Reaches Deep into National Psychologies", New York Times, July 1, 1979, p.1.
5. Transcript of the President's Address, New York Times, July 16, 1979, p.A10. All subsequent excerpts from the address are taken from this manuscript.
6. "Polls Show Doubt About Future", Washington Post, July 15, 1979, p.1. "Speech Lifts Carter's Rating", New York Times, July 18, 1979, p.1.
7. John Patton, "A Government as Good as its People", QJS, 63(October 1977) p.249-257. Christopher Lyle Johnstone, "Electing Ourselves in 1976", Western Speech, 42(Fall 1978) p.241-249.
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9. "Gone Fishing", editorial, New York Times, July 6, 1979, p.A20. "Decision by Carter to Put off Speech has Broad Effect", New York Times, July 6, 1979, p.1. "Crisis in Leadership", Washington Post, July 7, 1979, p.1.
10. "Reinventing the Administration", editorial, Washington Post, July 15, 1979, p.1. Terence Smith, "Theme at Camp David : Need to Lift a Nation's Spirits", New York Times, July 12, 1979, p.D15.
11. "How a President Acts", editorial, New York Times, July 19, 1979, p.A18.
12. "Polls Show Doubt About Future", Washington Post, July 15, 1979, p.1. This article points out the distinction between images of Carter as a man and as a President.
13. "Reshaping of the Presidency : 16 Days of Shifts and Reappraisals", New York Times, July 22, 1979, p.1.
14. "Capitol Speech Viewed by About 60 Million", New York Times, July 17, 1979, p.A15. "Speech Lifts Carter's Rating", New York Times, July 18, 1979, p.1.